



Idaho Fish and Game's

Mule Deer Update

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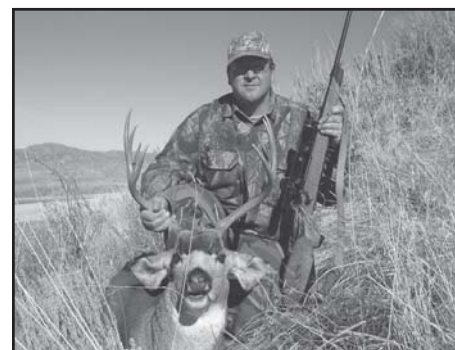
List of MDI Partners

Boy Scouts of America—Idaho troops
 ●
Brigham Young University
 ●
Bureau of Land Management
 ●
College of Southern Idaho
 ●
Deer Hunters of Idaho—Wood River chapter
 ●
Franklin County Fish and Game Club
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Idaho Department of Lands
 ●
Idaho State Bowhunters
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Idaho State University
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Lucky Clover 4-H
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Monsanto Company
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Mule Deer Foundation
 ●
National Wild Turkey Federation
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NRCS and FSA (Cassia, Oneida, Caribou, Franklin, Bingham, Bear Lake, Bannock, Power counties)
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Pheasants Forever
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Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
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Safari Club International-Idaho Chapter
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School Districts Twin Falls, Filer, Kimberly, Bliss, Dietrich, Shoshone, Buhl, Hagerman, Gooding, Valley, Castleford, Carey, Wendell, Glenns Ferry, Hansen, Murtaugh, Richfield, Jerome, Pocatello (Century, Highland, and Pocatello Alternate High Schools, Pocatello Area ESB), Preston, Marsh Valley, Malad, American Falls, Firth, Grace, North Gem, Soda Springs
 ●
Shoshone-Bannock Tribes
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Simplot Rod and Gun Club
 ●
Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Foundation
 ●
Sportsmen for Fish & Wildlife—Idaho Chapters
 ●
United States Forest Service

Mule Deer Initiative- An Overview

Toby Boudreau, MDI Coordinator, Idaho Fish and Game

You now have your hands on the very first issue of the *Mule Deer Update*—the latest communication tool in the Idaho Department of Fish and Game's Mule Deer Initiative (MDI) information campaign. This quarterly newsletter will help keep the public informed regarding the plans, strategies, and on-the-ground projects aimed at accomplishing the goals of the MDI, and will highlight the MDI successes shared by Fish and Game, its partners, and the citizens of Idaho. You can also receive email updates about MDI efforts by signing up on the Fish and Game website at <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/mdi>.



Toby Boudreau took this buck in 2005 in Southeast Idaho. IDFG photo.

What is the MDI?

The MDI, which started about a year ago, is a focused and increased effort by the Idaho Fish and Game to accomplish three goals:

- Improve mule deer numbers
- Increase hunter satisfaction
- Protect and improve habitat

So why do we need the MDI?

Mule deer are an important wildlife resource to Idaho's hunters and citizens. Southern and eastern Idaho have traditionally been renowned for abundant mule deer populations providing ample opportunity for hunting and harvest of mature bucks. From 1984 to 1992, high productivity and strong winter survival resulted in high mule deer numbers. Since then, the trend in mule deer populations in portions of Idaho has been downward. The combined effects of a dry summer in 1992 and hard winters during 1992 and 1993 resulted in a significant loss of mule deer. Relatively low recruitment levels since then combined with significant mortality during the winter of 2001-2002 in portions of eastern, southeastern, and south-central Idaho resulted in mule deer populations lower than desired by both Fish and Game biologists and hunters. Fish and Game plans to intensively manage deer to increase the number of mule deer and increase the proportion of mature bucks.

What's the problem?

When laying the foundation for the MDI, Fish and Game identified a number of factors that may influence mule deer populations:

1. Habitat changes caused by fire, fire suppression, invasive plants, and excessive livestock grazing have lessened the ability of some habitats to support mule deer populations.

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2. Climatic swings such as drought and severe winters play a key role in quality and quantity of habitat and the ability of mule deer young to survive to breeding age.
3. Habitats are fragmented and lost as a result of human population growth and real estate and industry development on mule deer habitat.
4. Interactions with elk can negatively affect mule deer and may increase when habitat is poor or limited.
5. Predators play a role with mule deer populations. The diversity and abundance of alternate prey species affects predator impacts on mule deer populations. The addition of wolves to some ecosystems may play an increasingly important role in mule deer population dynamics.
6. Off highway vehicle access has increased hunter efficiency and reduced the amount of habitat where deer can find refuge during hunting season.

Forming a "Game Plan"

With potential factors identified, the MDI action plan was formed. Entitled "A Roadmap for Success", the MDI action plan outlines six major strategies for accomplishing the goals of MDI. Strategies include habitat improvement, population management, law enforcement, predator management, access management and public involvement/outreach.

It is important to point out that the MDI is not a research project, although Fish and Game will be learning things as it goes and is working closely with researchers on certain aspects of mule deer biology. The MDI is all about doing things on the ground and working on

"It's encouraging to see the level of commitment that the Idaho Fish & Game Department has made."

—Cameron Wheeler, IDFG Commissioner

protecting and promoting all the factors that can positively influence mule deer populations.

The action plan is also adaptive. As Fish and Game learns about better ways to improve mule deer populations in Idaho, new challenges will undoubtedly present themselves. Therefore, the action plan will be revised as necessary based on new information, new ideas, and input from the public.

Fish and Game is committed to the MDI as a long-term endeavor. "It's encouraging to see the level of commitment that Idaho Fish and Game has made to trying to figure out what has gone on with mule deer populations," says Commission chair Cameron Wheeler of Ririe. "They are looking at every factor that impacts mule deer to see what can be done. In the meantime, they've got staff and volunteers on the ground working on projects that will help mule deer and other wildlife," Wheeler says. Department efforts include engaging the support of public land management agencies, private landowners, elected officials and folks like you to implement measurable actions that will positively affect mule deer populations. I am excited about the support Fish and Game has seen for MDI, and feel that we can only expect success.

The MDI Action Plan is available online at <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/mdi/> or at local Fish and Game offices. Comments are welcome.

MDI In Action

Wildlife Trapping/Monitoring/Management

- Organizing coyote removal on key fawning grounds in at least three units. Work will begin in January 2006 and run through July 2006.
- Trapping and collaring an additional 145 fawns and 75 does this winter on winter ranges in five units across southcentral, southeastern, and eastern Idaho to monitor movements and assess winter survival rates. Since 1998, more than 2000 deer have been trapped and collared across twelve winter ranges.
- Studying deer and elk competition.
- Installed big game guzzler on upper section of Sand Creek WMA with the cooperation of St. Anthony Mule Deer Foundation. Five guzzlers were refurbished in the Bell Rapids Area in 2005.
- Standardized general deer hunting season dates for 2005 to achieve more uniform hunter distribution.
- Eliminated female mountain lion quotas in MDI management areas in 2005.
- Working with landowners to provide *ACCESS YES!* opportunities.
- Collecting deer composition data in several units. Added another trend area this year bringing the total to more than 20 areas.
- Continuing to develop elk hunting seasons in critical areas to reduce elk/deer competition.
- Maintaining database of doe and fawn mule deer locations to target habitat work and coyote removal.
- Maintaining geospatial databases to better identify important deer habitats and define seasonal movements and use areas.

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Landowners and Fish and Game—Working Together for Mule Deer

By Terry Thomas, Habitat Biologist, Idaho Fish and Game
By now, many landowners have heard about the Mule Deer Initiative, a long term effort by Idaho Department of Fish and Game to restore, maintain and improve mule deer populations in Idaho. The initiative focuses on Fish and Game regions 4, 5 and 6 (Jerome, Pocatello and Idaho Falls).

While it seems that we never can understand a species well enough, there are a number of things that we know about mule deer that make us confident that we can improve habitat for them to a significant degree.

We are looking for opportunities to improve winter range areas and summer range areas. One major focus is Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands in Game Unit 69. Much of the CRP from Iona Hill to Bone, Taylor Canyon to Wolverine and also from Birch Creek to Conant Valley has, in my opinion, the potential to produce many more mule deer than currently supported. However, this CRP ground needs some help in order to do that.

Let me give you an example of how we worked with landowners Harold and Sharon Winther to improve their CRP, not just for mule deer, but for a number of other species at the same time.

**"I watch this place every single day.
Until now I didn't know there were that
many deer on the place."**

—Harold Winther

Like many farms, the Winther CRP has aged to the point where it was mostly smooth brome and orchard grass. These two species certainly hold the soil well but are of limited value for wildlife, especially mule deer and nesting birds. Also like many farms, the Winther property has many stands of aspen and brush, varying in size from an acre or two to large tracts.



A young volunteer helps plant a few of the 10,000 bitterbrush plants in GMU 54 in 2005. IDFG photo



Mike Wheeler prepares a CRP field a spring planting of forbs and bitterbrush in GMU 56. IDFG photo.

With the help of the Winthers, IDFG designed a wildlife planting that took advantage of the aspen patches and other known wildlife areas without having to convert the entire acreage. In fact, the entire project only encompassed 120 acres but maximized wildlife values.

The basic plan included selecting small acreages (one to five acres) to be planted to alfalfa mixes (depending on the area this could include: alfalfa, small burnet, Milkvetch, Sainfoin, blue flax, lupine, penstemon, Bluebunch wheatgrass, big bluegrass, Great Basin wildrye) next to every aspen patch in either a block or a strip. In other areas, large acreages of smooth brome were broken up with strips of alfalfa mixes.

Step one in the process was to contract spray the areas selected with glyphosate (RoundUp) at a minimum of a quart per acre. We waited until the grass began to yellow to evaluate the kill level. Once the grass started to die we moved on with a no-till stubble drill (Tye Pasture Pleaser) and drilled right through the trash on the ground.

The project was blessed with timely rains and is well on its way to full establishment. Even better, Harold and Sharon reported that the animal use on the new seedings was incredible. Harold stated, "I watch this place every single day. Until now I didn't know there were that many deer on the place." Besides deer, they also reported increased use by elk and moose and more "chickens" (sage grouse and sharp-tail grouse) than they have seen in a long time. The seedings have increased diversity in the CRP and will benefit a number of non-game species as well.

Idaho Fish and Game would like to see a lot of other landowners within our focus area get involved in this program to improve summer range for mule deer. We will be happy to help you plan projects to benefit mule deer.

If the project is in a priority area, we may be able to provide the seed, hire the custom sprayer and pay for tractor time. We could even provide the no-till drill.

If you are interested in helping mule deer and would like technical assistance or to find out if your land qualifies for assistance, please contact me at 525-7290.

Habitat Restoration / Improvement / Protection

- Cleared conifer out of six acres of an aspen stand on upper section of Sand Creek WMA.
- Cleared conifer out of five acres of an aspen stand in the Blackfoot River WMA.
- Conducted aspen rejuvenation projects on Tex Creek WMA.
- Worked with the USFS on aspen burning projects in Units 43, 44, and 49. Treated more than 1000 acres in 2003, 2004, and 2005.
- Working with 4 separate landowners and NRCS in the Big Lost River drainage (GMU 50) in an effort to develop MDI projects (food plot, seeding, and aspen management).
- Reviewed and commented on BLM grazing allotments in the Big Lost River (GMU 50) and Little Lost River drainages (GMU 51); participated with BLM in three grazing allotment assessments tours in Little Lost River drainage.
- Reviewed and commented on proposed prescribed burn in the head waters of Cherry Creek (GMU 50).
- Coordinated with Forest Service on RMEF grant proposal for aspen rejuvenation project near Reynolds Pass (GMU 61).
- Worked with Idaho Department of Lands on aspen rejuvenation project on Sheridan Ridge and Centennials (GMU 61).
- Implemented CRP interseeding projects in cooperation with private landowners on over 750 acres in the Upper Snake Region (2005), 650 acres in southeast Idaho (2002-2005), and planned projects for over 2000 acres in southcentral Idaho in 2006.
- Implemented Teton Canyon projects with Bureau of Reclamation: noxious weed control in canyon and mule deer habitat evaluations on ag lease lands (GMU 62).
- Developing winter range plans for all MDI impact areas. These plans include habitat assessments, population analyses, and mapping traditional and current winter ranges.
- The College of Southern Idaho and 13 Magic Valley High Schools in southern Idaho are raising 8,000 bare-root bitterbrush plants for transplanting to several winter range sites across south-central Idaho.
- In 2005 alone, planted over 20,000 bitterbrush, 1700 Hobble Creek Sage, 10,000 sage plants from Portneuf Wildlife Management Area seed, 12,000 Silver Sage Brush, 10,000 Four-winged Saltbush, and 5600 Winterfat on private and WMA lands across southcentral, southeastern, and the Upper Snake regions of Idaho. In the Magic Valley area, 10,000 bitterbrush plants were planted on BLM land in GMU 56 and 54. Additional plantings are planned for 2006.
- Continued monitoring of planting and fertilization projects and other vegetation treatments.

- Worked with the Natural Resource Policy Bureau, county officials, and other municipalities to address proposed development that will impact mule deer habitat (particularly winter range).
- Provided comments and mapping information on USFS Travel Plans, such as the recent Travel Plan Revision for the Caribou National Forest and the Sawtooth Travel Plan.
- Worked closely with BLM and Shoshone Bannock Tribes to manage access within the Soda Hills winter range. Identifying access restriction needs on winter ranges in the Magic Valley.
- Working with public and county officials to improve and control motorized access to mule deer habitat, explaining the rationale for minimizing disturbance.

Enforcement Summary

- Coordinated and implemented joint Fish and Game and Forest Service OHV patrols during the deer hunting season.
- Extended enforcement efforts on general patrols for deer hunters, spotlight patrols, check stations and mortality checks.
- Conducted public outreach efforts, including presentations on enforcement role in the MDI action plan.
- Documented locations of road-killed mule deer and removed carcasses.
- Helped identify locations for winter deer trapping and participated in trapping efforts.
- Collected tooth and jaw samples from mule deer.

Public Outreach and Education

- Present MDI educational programs to schools, sportsmen groups, and non-government organizations.
- Coordinate public meetings to discuss the MDI Action Plan and receive public comment.
- Produce a quarterly MDI newsletter for distribution throughout Idaho.
- Conduct MDI public outreach via various media sources; including television, newspaper, magazine, and radio.
- Provide information about the Mule Deer Initiative on the Fish and Game website, and provide opportunities for on-line public comment.
- Email MDI updates to interested parties.

For more information about the Mule Deer Initiative, contact Tony Boudreau at (208) 232-4703 or visit the Fish and Game website at <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/mdi/>. For questions on this newsletter, please contact Jennifer Jackson at (208) 232-4703.